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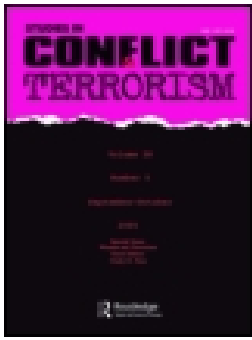
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Extreme Criminals: Reconstructing Ideas of Criminality through Extremist Narratives

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Abstract

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that there has been a determined effort by al-Qaeda, and more recently Islamic State, to recruit petty and street criminals into their networks. Despite this, and increasing global concern, there exists very little scholarly literature exploring this phenomenon, particularly empirically grounded. This paper directly addresses this gap in research, and is one of the, if not the, first to present an analysis underpinned by qualitative empirical interview data, collected from former extremists and active grassroots workers in the United Kingdom. The article determines that through religious and social justifications offered to reduce moral concerns, extremists encourage criminals to continue, intensify and diversify their criminality, with intentions to fund violent extremist activity, or to create social unrest within society. Rather than attempting to change behaviour, this is about reconstructing criminals' motivations; a consideration that has wider implications for counter-terrorism policy and operations.

Keywords

Crime-terror nexus; crime, criminality, extremism; violent extremism, radicalisation; terrorism; Islamic State; al-Qaeda; Dar al-Harb

Introduction

The attempted and successful recruitment of criminals into extremist organisations is visible across a plethora of historical examples. The penetration of local criminal structures across Europe and North Africa by the Armed Islamic Group¹, the relatively high recruitment of 'early Nazi' and 'neo-Nazi' youth with criminal backgrounds², the global distribution of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam cells involved in crime, and the involvement in criminality from groups on both sides during the Troubles³, provides some indication of this⁴. More recently, and in fact historically, increasing evidence suggests that those affiliated, ideologically or otherwise, with jihadi organisations like Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ), have been purposely attempting to recruit individuals and groups with a history of criminality⁵.

These developing relationships between associates of IS and AQ, and criminals have been highlighted as a serious worry by a growing number of states across the world⁶. Across Europe, events in London⁷, Paris⁸, and Copenhagen⁹, demonstrate how monies attained from criminality can be used to support aspiring jihadis travelling to Syria to join IS¹⁰. Similar, if not more pronounced, anxieties are raised with the involvement of former and current criminals in the attempted and actual conduct of terrorism in the West¹¹. To this end, recent research has demonstrated that over a 20-year period, between 1994 to 2013, around 38% of the terrorist plots analysed in Europe were – at least partly – funded by petty and street level criminal activity, including drug-dealing, burglary and fraud¹². This, and wider studies, indicates that certain jihadist networks and organisations appear to be placing more emphasis on the recruitment of petty and street level criminals into their ranks¹³, or, at the least encouraging followers to engage in this type of criminality.

This encouragement – and critically the religious and social justifications underpinning this activity – is evident in the abundance of extremist material available publically. In a 2010 edition of AQ's 'Inspire' magazine, for example, Anwar al-Awlaki endeavoured to convince its readers to dispossess

the wealth of the 'disbelievers'¹⁴; predominantly due to the foreign policy decisions of their governments. IS have adopted similar strategies, evident in a recent 2017 edition of 'Rumiyah' magazine, making analogous assertions to Inspire and lauding praise on those who continue their criminality to further IS causes¹⁵. The article stresses to its readers that Muslims living in various countries globally are considered to be in a state of 'Dar al-Harb', '...a land where the blood and wealth of its inhabitants are permissible to violate...'¹⁶, due to, whether perceived or otherwise, these countries being at war with Muslim states, or Muslims, globally. This infers that the 'wealth of the Kuffar is "Ghanimah", "Fay", or "Ihtitab"'¹⁷; meaning it can be taken with force, without force, or deceptively through fraud.

Through the analysis of qualitative empirical data collected with former extremists and those working at the grassroots level in the UK, this paper explores the religious¹⁸ and social justifications of partaking in criminality offered to petty and street level criminals (referred to as 'criminals' hereafter) by violent extremists affiliated to IS and AQ (referred to as 'extremists' hereafter)¹⁹. This article, then, provides an important contribution to a phenomenon that is – despite increasing global concern – significantly under-researched²⁰. There does, however, exist a growing number of studies which statistically discuss the involvement of criminals within IS and AQ operations²¹. Although these quantitative based studies have obvious merits, they are unable to provide the particular intricacy and depth of analysis which is available from the empirical qualitative data offered within this article. As far as can be determined, this is one of the, if not the, first to do so, particularly in the context of the United Kingdom. This is especially relevant when considering that this complex and highly personal phenomenon, as far as can be determined, is not a widely distributed social issue, but occurs in relation to a relatively small proportion of the population.

The focus on those affiliated²², either ideologically or otherwise, to both IS and AQ²³ within the data, and subsequently this article, needs to be mentioned, albeit briefly. Although there are exceptionally distinct differences between these two groups across varying considerations, there are a number of striking parallels between their associations with criminals and criminality. Critically, in respect to this paper, this includes, as confirmed in recent wider research²⁴, distinct overlaps with theological and ideological logic towards the justifications and motivations of engaging in criminality.

This paper is set out in three substantive sections. The first, and following section, considers key works in this area, with a particular focus upon the crime-terror nexus. The section works to demonstrate a gap in research, and outline how this paper will address this issue and contribute to this area. The next section discusses the methodology employed to collect the empirical data. The final section outlines the key findings from the research. It is primarily argued, here, that in an effort to encourage criminals to continue, intensify and diversify their criminality, extremists endeavour to further reduce any moral concern criminals may hold of engaging in crime. As mentioned, this is undertaken by extremists using religious justifications, i.e. considerations around concepts like Dar al-Harb, and social legitimisation, whereby through adherence to global kinship, criminals believe they were becoming more altruistic in nature. Funds attained from criminal activity can be used by extremists to develop violent extremist activity or create social unrest in the UK; where both outcomes work to undermine their 'enemy'. Finally, a concluding remarks section discusses the value of these findings in the context of counter-terrorism policy and operational considerations, and how these results can inform critical decision-making.

Extremism and Petty and Street Criminality: A Research Gap

When considering the links between extremism, terrorism, and criminality, the concept of the 'crime-terror nexus'²⁵ (CTN) is one of the more developed, noteworthy, and obvious approaches found within the academic literature. At its very core, the concept maintains that a nexus exists between organised crime (predominantly focussed upon maximising profits) and terrorist networks (pursuing some type of ideological, religious, spiritual, political, social, or other, objective). Essentially, each group is able to adopt one another's tactics²⁶ or form alliances²⁷ to achieve their own particular goals. Some authors even argue that there is the potential for 'black holes' to exist, where groups' original boundaries are delineated whereby they demonstrate some of the characteristics of the other²⁸.

Evidence of the CTN operating is plentiful, with examples including the narco-cartels and guerrillas of Colombia²⁹, the Afghan Taliban³⁰, Republican and Loyalist groups during the Troubles³¹, Hezbollah³², and the Kosovo Liberation Army³³. There is also much evidence of jihadi inspired terrorists having links to, or engaging in, organised criminal activity, in order to achieve certain objectives. In one particular analysis of 40 jihadi cells involved in terrorist plots across Europe, the "second most common income source...[was the] illicit trade of various goods such as drugs, cars, forged documents and weapons."³⁴ The proceeds were used to fund violent extremist activity, including the Madrid train bombing in 2004, plots orchestrated by the Hofstad group in Holland, and the attack on a kosher supermarket in Paris in 2012³⁵.

When considering the premise of this paper, however, there are critical limitations with our traditional understanding of the CTN, including its variations, such as the 'crime-conflict nexus'³⁶, or fears of jihadi fighters returning back to their homeland and engaging in criminality (rather than acts of terrorism)³⁷. For one, although the theoretical underpinnings of the CTN can be found in academic writings dating back decades, there are continuing disagreements to whether it provides relevant

insight. In fact, as is particularly favoured, some argue that the CTN is overly broad³⁸, or even 'overblown'³⁹.

The key concern, however, although relevant for their respective fields, is that these approaches tend to concentrate upon organised crime, whereby, as previously mentioned with reference to extremist propaganda, and determined in numerous quantitative studies⁴⁰ of late, certain jihadi organisations, like IS, appear to be increasing their focus on recruiting petty criminals⁴¹. There is not the assumption here that IS's organised crime intentions have diminished (even though capability may well have been due to recent losses on the ground). It is to highlight the distinct lack of academic (and policy) attention toward the emergent links between petty and street crime and violent extremism; an issue that this paper directly addresses.

As a result, the intricate interplay that develops between extremists and criminals is very rarely, if at all, discussed within this context. Basra et al., therefore, suggest that contemporary issues should not focus on the convergence of criminal and terrorist organisations, but more of their social networks, environments, or milieus⁴². This is somewhat demonstrated within their own research, an approach they term as the 'new crime-terror nexus' through the analysis of 79 'European jihadists with criminal pasts'⁴³. Once again distinguishing this phenomenon from the traditional CTN, the authors claim both criminal and terrorist organisations have come to recruit from the "same pool of people"⁴⁴; an idea corroborated in wider pieces of literature⁴⁵. This has, according to Basra and Neumann, further blurred the lines between crime and extremism, where – considering the recent terrorism case studies across Europe – pertinent questions are being asked of whether the perpetrator was a criminal, a terrorist, or both⁴⁶.

Although the study lacks some depth, the contribution made by Basra et al.'s work to this highly under-researched area should not be underestimated. Critically, their research begins to map out some of the key issues associated with this phenomenon. Of particular importance for this article is the theme of 'Radicalisation and Recruitment', specifically – albeit only very briefly discussed – the concept of 'legitimising crime' (or justifying crime). Whilst jihadism offered redemption for some in their sample, others utilised it to justify the criminal activity they were involved in. This is primarily about extremists telling criminals, "‘you do not need to change your behavior, only your motivation.’ This could prove to be an incredibly powerful message, as it promises immediate gratification, as well as spiritual legitimation for criminal behavior."⁴⁷

However, not all, at least historically, have been in agreement in the, albeit scant, literature to whether organisations like AQ accommodate the engagement or justification of criminality by its adherents. On the one hand, some authors argue that AQ were at one point engaged in vigorous screening of its members to 'weed out...those with criminal pasts'⁴⁸, as partaking in crime was seen as contradictory to the group's ideology⁴⁹. Other commentators, such as Dishman⁵⁰, argue that this ideological stance changed after a breakdown in internal hierarchical organisational structure which enabled certain terrorist groups, including AQ, to become more able to engage in activity that was previously not permitted; including participation in criminality and the recruitment of criminals into the group. On the other hand, wider research suggests that AQ have had former and active criminals in their ranks since close to the group's inception⁵¹. Broader studies corroborate this, with Bakker's research, for instance, discovering that around a quarter of terrorists sampled, between 2001-2006, held criminal records⁵².

Similar to the latter mentioned studies, with IS, the compatibility of its ideologies with criminal activity appears to be more forthright. In addition to the abundance of aforementioned extremist

propaganda encouraging participation in crime, more recent quantitative jihadi-profile based studies demonstrate increasing numbers of individuals with criminal pasts who have been involved in violent extremism⁵³. Anecdotally also, there are various distinct signs of activity which have been encouraged by particular ideology justifying criminality. This includes the young British woman who claimed it was permissible to take out a student loan to fund travel to join IS, with the intention of not paying it back as 'we are in a state of war'⁵⁴; relating, as mentioned in the Introduction, to the concept of 'Dar al-Harb'.

This concept of Dar al-Harb, and various other similar religious and spiritual considerations, are critical to our understanding of how criminal activity is legitimised through extremist narratives. These ideas have, at least, been introduced in certain studies⁵⁵. However, they lack the depth of analysis required to understand in greater detail how they operate and are mobilised. Further, as well as focussing on religious justifications offered to criminals to reduce moral concerns of engaging in criminality, there also needs to be consideration of the social aspects of motivation change, which includes redefining morality and moving from a position of selfishness towards selflessness. These religious and social justifications have, to some degree, been considered directly in relation to the conduct of terrorism⁵⁶, though are yet to be fully explored in regards to the legitimisation of criminality; a gap in the research that this paper directly addresses and remedies.

This is reflective of the new CTN more generally, where, irrespective of this recent increased visibility, or regardless of whether or not this is a new phenomenon, 'it is clear that the nature and dynamics of this [new] crime-terror nexus have been under-researched and poorly understood. There is virtually no academic literature on the subject.'⁵⁷ In addition, despite the recent increased attention, 'empirical works are rare', where 'much remains outstanding.'⁵⁸ Considering these

arguments, then, this paper provides a strong evidence-based contribution to the highly under-researched topic of the new crime-terror nexus, one that is qualitative in nature.

Empirical Data

This paper is informed by empirical data in the form of 31 qualitative semi-structured interviews. The intent here was not to conduct a large-scale inquiry across the population, but to 'drill down' to attain a richer understanding of the issues at hand, from those who have the relevant experience, expertise, and exposure. The respondents who participated in this study were, therefore, selected on the basis of being – in a similar way to Donald Campbell's definition – 'informed informants'⁵⁹, and are referred to as such throughout the article.

The group was purposefully sampled on the basis of having first-hand experience with issues around radicalisation and (violent) extremism. Through the UK government's Channel⁶⁰ programme or their own outreach initiatives, respondents in this sample were in contact and worked closely with those considered to be susceptible to extremist ideologies, hold extreme viewpoints/subscribe to extremist ideologies, or have been arrested, detained, and possibly incarcerated, under a Terrorism Act. In fact, many in the sample regularly conceived and implemented their own intervention and organic de-, and often counter-radicalisation strategies⁶¹ at the local level. It is also essential to outline that almost all of the grassroots workers in this study were former extremists themselves; which enabled them to additionally draw upon personal experiences. Further, around a fifth of these individuals identified as imams or religious leaders, as well as grassroots workers.

However, recruiting these respondents was by no means a straightforward task, as the phenomenon of extremism and criminality is not evenly distributed across the population. Thus, as similarly argued by Becker⁶², there is no 'such officially completed list of participants'. Additionally, the actual number of respondents was very limited, with many being dispersed across much of the UK. In order to address these particular issues, the study adopted a snowball sampling strategy; an approach often embraced in research when respondents are difficult to access⁶³. This commenced with a small number of initial seed interviews undertaken with contacts the researcher had acquired during previous employment. There were, naturally, various potential negative implications to consider with this strategy, including ensuring there is a balanced perspective, or avoiding bias and erroneous data. A number of measures were employed to minimise the chance of this occurring, including analysing the data across different networks for consistency.

Respondents were, as mentioned above, widely dispersed and based in various cities and towns across England and Wales, including London, Cardiff, Birmingham, Newcastle, Blackburn, and Bristol. In order to maintain strict confidentiality, specific locations are restricted in the main text. In this regard, given the sensitivities attached to this research, it is important to, at least briefly, mention the wider ethical governance of the study. There were a multitude of risks and ethical considerations that needed to be rigorously analysed in relation to both researcher and respondents. Full ethical approval was obtained, and the author was in frequent contact with the appropriate institutional research governance team for advice when needed.

It is also important to outline that all of the informed informants were male, due to various reasons. Most notably, this reflects the apparent limited number of female grassroots workers operating in this particular area, and potentially due to the threat of extremism predominantly emanating from men⁶⁴. However, before the recent fall of IS across Iraq and Syria, there had been growing numbers

of Muslim women travelling to join the organisation⁶⁵, holding various, predominantly non-combatant roles⁶⁶.

With the understanding that Muslims are far from a homogeneous group, the respondents came from various sects across Islam. This was given due and appropriate thought when considering discussions around Islamic jurisprudence during the data collection, though the conversation relating to religious justification towards criminal, and more widely violent extremist, activity appeared to transcend these boundaries⁶⁷. In a similar way, as outlined in the introduction of this paper, the religious justifications provided by IS and AQ, have distinct overlaps. With similar contemplation, the criminals discussed in this account, according to the interviewees, identified as being Muslim, regardless of their depth of, and commitment to, religiosity.

Finally, with consideration to the premise of this paper, i.e. the affiliations between extremists and criminals, it was difficult to ascertain how widespread the issue actually is, particularly considering the qualitative nature of the data collected. However, the informed informants in this study strongly felt it was a pressing and critical issue which caused great concern within their own work; a feeling that was particularly apparent with the former extremists. These ideas are corroborated in the research undertaken by Basra et al. where it is argued that it remains unclear how prevalent the issue is, but where 'the phenomenon has become more pronounced, more visible, and more relevant to the ways in which jihadist groups operate.'⁶⁸

Extreme Criminals: Religious and Social Reconstructions of Criminality

The empirical data reported that the criminals described within this account were engaging in various acts of criminality. These crimes were thought to be wide-ranging and can be considered in a number of different contexts. Drawing distinct parallels with findings in wider studies⁶⁹, the vast majority of illegal activity focussed upon what can be described as petty and street level crimes⁷⁰, predominantly including burglary, theft, fraud, mugging, and the sale of narcotics.

As the criminals discussed within this account were thought to be engaging in criminality prior to their affiliation with extremists, it could be argued that they would have, to some greater or lesser degree, started to justify this type of activity. It is thought by certain academics that some deviants attempt to neutralise moral concerns as they are conscious, to some degree, of their obligations to adhere to law and societal norms⁷¹. However, the use of the term 'attempt' is pivotal here, where this task is by no means straightforward. The discipline of criminology is replete with literature suggesting criminals harbour some level of moral concern with aspects of the activity they are involved in⁷², with some, in fact, holding 'moral superiority', and becoming selective in the illegal activity they engage in for that very reason⁷³.

With that in mind, a key theme to emerge from the data related to the alternative modes of reducing moral concerns extremists were offering to criminals. As outlined earlier, this predominantly concerns religious and social based justifications towards partaking in criminality. These ideas were discussed throughout the data collection. During one interview, for example, a former extremist elucidated the example of his cousin, who, at one point, was allegedly considered to be the 'right-hand man' of a violent extremist preacher who has since been implicated in a number of terrorist acts. The cousin was, apparently, involved in various criminality prior to his contact with the extremist. However, post-affiliation, the extremist provided additional justifications for this activity:

‘...he was with him probably for a good three, four years, almost like a right-hand man to him, my cousin yeah, and interestingly he was up to credit card fraud, all kinds of stuff, all kinds of gang related activity...[the extremist preacher] was giving an Islamic legitimisation to the whole thing...’⁷⁴

The term ‘Islamic justification’ used by the respondent has much relevance here, particularly as it was mentioned frequently during the data collection. However, as compellingly argued in wider studies of radicalisation, although religion plays a complex⁷⁵, yet important, role at various junctures, it is by no means a causal factor⁷⁶. Similar assertions can be made with the justification of engaging in criminality. These ideas are, generally, divergent to the academic literature on religion and crime, where the vast majority attests to the value of religion with achieving intended behaviour and being positively related to self-control in society⁷⁷. Similar deviations can be seen in wider pieces of research, including Topalli et al.’s study on Christian ‘street offenders’ which found that although many participants displayed a lack of depth in religious knowledge and understanding, they attempted to utilise religion to justify criminality⁷⁸. In fact, Topalli et al. contend that religion can have a ‘counterintuitive’ effect which not only allows for criminality, but encourages it.

At the heart of this ‘Islamic justification’ is the concept of ‘Dar al-Harb’. At its very core, it refers to the existence of a ‘land of war’ or ‘state of war’. With adherence to this notion, there is a belief that when ‘war’ is declared against one Muslim state, or against Muslim populations, then it is a ‘war’ against Islam⁷⁹ itself. In this regard, the argument posited by extremists is simple yet immensely effective. That being, if Britain is at war against Muslims elsewhere in the world, then they are also at war with Muslims in the UK; as conveyed by a former violent extremist:

‘...one of the things they say is “look we’re in a state of war...the Muslim Ummah is one. So, if they declare war on [a Muslim country], they declare war on all of us [Muslims], so we’re in a state of war.”’⁸⁰

Consequently, those countries in the West, including the UK, are considered to be ‘legitimate targets’ of criminality predominantly due to their involvement in conflicts against and within Muslim states. As the same respondent quipped, criminals are told, ‘in a state of war you can do all sorts of [illegal] things...’.⁸¹ To them, this implies that British society is in a state of confusion, chaos and crisis, where people are permitted to undertake any type of activity needed to ‘survive’. All rules and norms cease to exist, as outlined by a grassroots worker from his own experiences of undertaking de-radicalisation work in prisons:

‘...in Dar al-Harb you have special conditions...when there is a real land of war you may have certain circumstances [where] you might be allowed to steal to survive, because, you know, it’s a land of chaos...which normally in Islam you wouldn’t be allowed in a safe society. Whereas in the land of chaos and the land of war some of these things are lifted...So they will apply those conditions here, living in this safe environment, they’ll say “no, it’s Dar al-Harb, because these people are technically at war with the Muslims”’.⁸²

It is also important to pick up on the term ‘...the Ummah is one...’ mentioned by the former extremist quoted prior. In Arabic, ‘Ummah’ refers to ‘community’ or ‘nation’, and often discussed as ‘Ummah wahida’, meaning one community or a nation. Introduced to many Muslims from a young

age, the concept forms, as explicated by an imam, the cornerstone of 'Islamic religious, traditional, social, cultural, and on occasion political, beliefs'⁸³. It is by no means a deviant concept, and, in fact, it can be argued that it promotes a sense of selflessness. It assumes a deviant dimension when considered in conjunction with Dar al-Harb and, of course, used to justify criminality. Extremists are aware they need to redefine and reconstruct these ideas for the criminal. As well as attempting to further reduce moral concerns about engaging in criminality, this is about attaching these acts to notions of altruism and camaraderie.

Those criminals involved in this activity were often requested to donate a percentage of their profit to particular agendas or causes outlined by extremists; posited as a requirement of their duty as part of the Ummah. One example discussed by a grassroots worker concerned, as he described them, a 'street gang', that he had personal experience with. Members of this group were involved in selling narcotics, fraud, and street robbery. The group claimed to be donating a portion of their profits from crime to, what they described as, 'Islamic charities' based in Muslim states. Here, they considered themselves to be 'Robin Hood' type figures, whereby they were stealing from the wealthy and 'giving money away to the poor'⁸⁴; a finding demonstrated in wider research on street robbery⁸⁵. Thus, as well as the religious, extremists are now afforded the opportunity to promote social justifications for criminality.

However, ideas of altruism were not merely limited to donating to Islamic charities alone. Violent extremism, or the potential of it, was also discussed during interviews. Corroborating what has been discussed earlier in this paper, and with consideration that much of the conversation at this point was, naturally, anecdotal at times, some respondents believed that monies attained from criminality were being sent internationally to subsidise terrorist organisations, used to facilitate travel abroad whereby people could join terrorist groups, or used to fund domestic acts of terrorism, with the

latter not requiring large sums⁸⁶. In this regard, with strong connotations to the aforementioned discussion on 'Ummah', several respondents recounted their own experiences, including a grassroots worker who reflected back on certain individuals he once engaged with in his own de-radicalisation work. These individuals, it was claimed, were involved in credit card fraud:

'...it was claimed the money was going to help the cause and so [they argued] "we're taking from the oppressors to aid the oppressed and those that are fighting the cause of the oppressed."⁸⁷

Another grassroots worker told of a similar situation, though specifically mentioned terrorism as one potential objective of the funds:

'...you can deal drugs as long as you [donate]...so they will use criminal activity to fund terrorist activities as well...'.⁸⁸

Encouraging engagement in criminality goes beyond the aforementioned objectives of the extremists; notions that transcend our traditional ideas of terrorism. Through the continuation, the intensification and the diversification of criminality, there is the belief held by extremists, at least those discussed in the sample, that this will create social unrest within the UK, behaviour that is believed to undermine British and Western society. The British state, as well as large swathes of her citizens, are considered to be the enemy. A prominent example in the empirical data concerned the sale of narcotics, or more so the consequences from its use. As outlined by a number of respondents, the narrative provided by extremists is relatively simple. That being, the more drugs sold, the more people in society use drugs, the more their 'enemy' will suffer:

‘...their ultimate thinking as well [is] you’re corrupting your enemy basically; you’re killing your enemy through drugs’⁸⁹

Respondents spoke frequently of examples where the underlying aim of the criminality was to create social unrest in society, or in some way to further destabilise the enemy. One particular account, of benefit fraud⁹⁰, elucidated by a respondent, further demonstrates this. Speaking of a group he had personally dealt with in his capacity as a grassroots worker, one member worked in the local ‘benefits office’ and was administering fraudulent cheques. It was claimed that their motive was to ‘undermine the British government’⁹¹.

This does, however, highlight, one of the contradictions that exists with this type of activity. It cannot be assumed that criminals acting under the guidance and justification of extremists are doing so in the perceived interests of all of their Muslim kin, as the Ummah paradigm insinuates. For instance, for those selling narcotics, the end users may well be Muslim themselves. The victims of terrorist attacks could be Muslim. The victims of fraud could be Muslim. These considerations have been documented in previous research on radicalisation⁹², which explicates there are often conflicting and contradictory stances towards how Muslims are viewed by extremist groups; where those who do not subscribe to the extremist group’s ideologies, whether Muslim or otherwise, are considered to be part of the issue, rather than the solution. Much of this alludes to the ‘us vs. them’ hypothesis; considered to play a key role in the process of radicalisation⁹³. Here, criminals increasingly believe they are working towards furthering the cause of their new perceived ‘in-group’, in turn causing increased polarisation with the ‘out-group’⁹⁴, where the out-group involves all (including fellow Muslims) who do not subscribe to the group’s ideologies.

Nevertheless, it appears that criminals are provided with opportunities to help further, or achieve, extremists' causes, aims and objectives, without radically changing their activities. This goes back to the previous argument that extremists purvey to criminals that they need not change their behaviour, but simply their motivation⁹⁵. It can be argued, then, that 'the delinquent both has his cake and eats it too'⁹⁶. It can also be said, considering this, that those extremists discussed within this paper are not pushing, at least initially, great changes on to those involved in criminality, particularly as they have been involved in crime prior to their affiliation. Similar to the hypothesis outlined by Milgram⁹⁷, it is the case of building upon reassurances provided by past actions for future ones.

However, this change of motivation is, with some criminals, not as straightforward as others. There is, in a sense, some overlap with the theoretical underpinnings of the traditional CTN here, where groups, or individuals, "move back and forth...ebbing and flowing between ideological and profit motives."⁹⁸ These relationships are sometimes complex, and even contradictory. According to the data, criminals did not always donate proceedings from crime to the extremists' causes; alluding to the notion that involvement with extremism is not cleanly grounded in ideology⁹⁹. Thus, on occasion, certain criminals appeared to be embracing the justifications offered to them for engaging in crime, 'though will keep the money'.¹⁰⁰ It was alleged that some of these funds were used, as corroborated in wider research¹⁰¹, for 'partying' and other hedonistic vices, where criminals were described as 'living it up!'¹⁰².

The allure of personal rewards extends further. The recurring example presented within the empirical data referred to the afterlife. As found in wider narratives on radicalisation¹⁰³, respondents

claimed criminals were being offered, more so promised, additional benefits. As well as believing they are now undertaking their criminality for a righteous cause, these included afterlife rewards:

‘You don’t have to worry about all those lives you took, all those families that you destroyed, those individuals that are now addicted to all types of drugs and what not, and those people that are scared to leave their home because of you. Because now you’ve rectified your situation and you can still be a thug, [but now] for a good cause. Your thuggery [sic] will have some meaning...And you’re going to go to heaven for it...’¹⁰⁴

When considering traditional research on the role of religion within criminality, it is, more often than not, presumed that punishment in the afterlife serves as a deterrent to committing crime. Those that are involved are often fully conscious of these castigations¹⁰⁵. Extremists are aware of these anxieties and attempt to not only neutralise them, but also reconstruct these ideas as being morally positive by stressing that engagement in criminality is considered to be a ‘form of worship’¹⁰⁶.

Concluding Remarks

This article has argued that violent extremists in the UK are offering petty and street criminals religious and social justifications for engaging in criminality, in a bid to reduce any residing moral concerns the criminal may hold for committing these illegal acts. This is not about changing the criminals’ behaviour, quite the contrary. It is about reconstructing ideas and perceptions of crime and its consequences and, importantly, altering people’s motivations behind committing crime to align more with the extremist groups’ ideologies. Membership within this new subculture¹⁰⁷

provides the criminal with a new moral compass, where their criminality is now perceived to be for the greater good and altruistic in nature; at least in accordance with the ideologies of the extremist. If extremists are successful with achieving this, then possible outcomes, i.e. those based around potentially funding violent extremism through criminal activity or achieving social unrest in society, could be devastating.

Alongside contributing to a significantly under-researched scholarly area, there are wider implications for the findings of this research; cutting across policy and operational contemplations. Developing our understanding of the alternative ways in which people could become affiliated to extremists and also potentially to extremism provides a better insight of how we can begin to address these threats. This needs to be reflected, and addressed directly, within relevant counter-terrorism policy, though rarely, if at all, is¹⁰⁸. In addition, in an operational sense, these developing relationships between extremists and criminals work to demonstrate the ever-increasing requirement to ensure there is continuing and improved communication within and across agencies on this and similar issues¹⁰⁹. Research conducted at the local-level on preventing violent extremism reinforces this, where, due to various gaps in co-production within and across agencies, there is a fear that individuals at risk can slip through the proverbial net¹¹⁰. This of course includes co-operation between different states. In addition, it can be argued that building a richer and more comprehensive picture of the current threat can assist security agencies with critical decision-making. The case of Anis Amri, who used a truck to kill 12 and injure scores more at a Berlin Christmas market in 2016, provides a good illustration of this. Due to a number of incidents and affiliations, Amri was known to police and intelligence agencies within Germany, and across Europe. However, it has been claimed that due to Amri's involvement in dealing and consuming drugs, he was not considered to pose an immediate threat¹¹¹. In reality, he was merely months away from committing an attack. The situation may well have been, of course, far more complex than this, with

security agencies becoming increasingly aware of the developing affiliations between crime and extremism. However, at the same time, there is little doubt that providing additional insight on this issue could contribute, in some minor or major way, to preventing future attacks.

Finally, something can be said for how this research stream could be developed moving forward. There are numerous aspects that deserve further empirical exploration; the religious and social justifications of engaging in criminality, as discussed within this article, merely forms one part of the phenomenon. One key area of investigation would consider how these developments both impact and advance our understanding of radicalisation¹¹². It is by no means claimed that all criminals go through the same processes when affiliated to extremists. Nor is it implied in this account that all criminals within this context will become radicalised whereby they internalise violent extremist ideologies and potentially participate in acts of terrorism. It is widely agreed that radicalisation is not a linear process, nor is it a conveyor belt system¹¹³, nor does it rely solely on ideological commitment alone¹¹⁴. What can be said, however, is that as this relationship develops between the extremist and criminal, the former is afforded greater opportunity to propagate wider ideologies. How this process cultivates and develops needs further investigation.

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